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Prejudice and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation:
Myth and Reality about Gays and Lesbians in Los Angeles County

Report on a Public Hearing by the
Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations


April 1985

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Acknowledgments

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The Commission is especially indebted to the 27 persons who testified at the hearing and whose names and organizational affiliation are listed at the end of the report. The Commission thanks the United States Mission, which provided lunch at the hearing.

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Introduction

On June 13, 1984, at Plummer Park in West Hollywood, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations held a public hearing on "Prejudice and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation: Myth and Reality about Gays and Lesbians in Los Angeles County."

The hearing was planned to provide an opportunity for unbiased and informed discussion of beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality, including the myths and stereotypes that give rise to prejudice and discrimination. It was also designed to give the Commission information about the extent of discrimination based on sexual orientation within the County of Los Angeles.

The purpose of the hearing, which was the first of its kind in the nation, was consistent with the Commission's basic mandate to encourage the acceptance of all persons in all aspects of community life, foster attitudes which lead to civic harmony, and promote equal opportunity for all of the residents of the County.

Hearing Testimony

The testimony presented at the hearing covered a broad range of issues and concerns. These are summarized in the following pages. In some cases specific speakers are not mentioned. However, a complete list of the speakers can be found in the Appendix.

Myths and Stereotypes

One underlying theme was repeated throughout all of the testimony: the destructive effect of stereotypes and myths about gays and lesbians and how these adversely affect virtually every aspect of homosexual life.

Jim Kepner, Curator of the National Gay Archives, examined bigotry against gays and lesbians from a historical perspective, documenting hundreds of years of systematic exclusion of homosexuals from mainstream society. Mr. Kepner stated that prejudice against homosexuals is unique in that the denial of civil and political rights to lesbians and gays is sanctioned by our society's view of homosexuality. According to Mr. Kepner, the commonly accepted belief that homosexuals are "queer" and live in a "state of depravity" enables our institutions to deny gays and lesbians equitable treatment without experiencing any of the usual repercussions or public outrage.

Reverend Peg Beissert of the West Hollywood Presbyterian Church testified that many people reinforce victimization of gays and lesbians by invoking religious scripture. She said the simple fact that Biblical injunctions against homosexuality exist does not necessarily mean that this judgment is correct today. For example, many passages of the Bible seem to sanction

slavery, depict women as inferior, and forbid divorce. She encouraged the acceptance of gays and lesbians by religious institutions in order to minimize homophobia and bigotry aimed at gays and lesbians. It was also pointed out that church acceptance would offer faithful lesbians and gays a sense of love and value which all people need.

Ivy Bottini, a lesbian activist, said that all gay and lesbian prejudice is an extension of sexism. In traditional sex-role stereotyping, she explained, women are viewed as weak, vacillating, and nurturing, while men are viewed as strong, decisive, and independent. Conversely, lesbians are seen as powerful or manlike, while gay men are seen as weak or womanly. Since these stereotypes about homosexuals are contrary to preconceived ideas of proper gender behavior, she explained, gays and lesbians become an inevitable target of bigotry.

Even the mental health establishment has contributed to the myths about homosexual behavior, according to the testimony of Dr. Alan Malyon, President of the Los Angeles Association of Clinical Psychologists. He recalled that homosexuality was officially diagnosed as psychopathology in the 1940's, and that during the 1950's through the early 1970's it was slightly upgraded to a perversion. According to the testimony of Dr. Malyon, a major mental health study in 1965 led the way for research which finally took homosexuality off the books as a mental illness. This study by Dr. Evelyn Hooker found no significant difference in the incidence of any mental health problem between gays and heterosexuals. Still, Dr. Malyon asserted, the stigma of pathology persists today among many mental health professionals, who continue to try to "cure" homosexual patients. This happens, he said, despite all of the existing research, which indicates sexual orientation is established very early in life.

Chris Uszler of the Alliance of Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry expressed concern that the media perpetuates the myth of gays and lesbians as deviates. He noted the current absence on television of any homosexual characters whose sexual orientation is not the focus of their role, and the complete lack of positive gay or lesbian characters in general.

Aslan Heidorn, Managing Editor of Frontiers Magazine, was critical of the news media, which, she said, perpetuate stereotypes by sensationalizing crimes involving homosexuals. As an example, she cited the headline "Homosexual Torture" on a newspaper story about convicted murderer John Gacy. On the same page, she said, was another story about the rape of a woman and murder of her boyfriend. Though this was a heterosexual torture murder, the sexual orientation of the murderer was not made an issue.

Attorney Thomas Coleman expressed concern that AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) has allowed much homophobia to come out of the closet. He stated that the AIDS issue was being used as an excuse for latent anti-gay feelings to surface and escalate to violent proportions, especially in the San Francisco area.

Lillene Fifield of the Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center expressed concern that the focus of the hearing might encourage testimony that exaggerated an already grim view of homosexual life, and could itself perpetuate the existing stereotypes and myths.

Health

Dr. Jane Patterson, gynecologist and author, addressed the problem of lesbian health care. She referred to an American Medical Association study done in the late 1970's wherein many doctors admitted they would refuse to treat a lesbian patient. Additionally, she said, almost all doctors remain ignorant of the lesbian lifestyle and its implications for diagnosis and treatment. For instance, she pointed out that few physicians are aware that sexually transmitted diseases are extremely uncommon in lesbians. Since many lesbians fear exposure because they could lose custody of children or be dismissed from a job, the doctor's commitment to confidentiality is crucial to them. She stated that physicians can be insensitive and often identify sexual orientation in red on hospital and office records. Dr. Patterson stated that a lack of publicly-identified lesbian physicians is a problem, and some medical schools and training hospitals routinely turn down known lesbian applicants.

Dr. Martin Finn, Medical Director of Public Health Programs for the County of Los Angeles, confirmed the need for medical school curricula to include information on gay and lesbian lifestyles and health problems. He testified that a homosexual's fear or lack of comfort with a physician can result in an inadequate medical history and a poor diagnosis.

Dr. Allan Pinka, representing the AIDS Project, stated that 95 percent of the people with AIDS in Los Angeles are gay or bisexual men, compared to 75 percent nationwide. Dr. Pinka feels that these statistics may add to the public perception that AIDS is a gay disease. It was emphasized by Dr. Pinka that AIDS is not restricted to gay men, and is caused by a virus which can be transmitted through sexual contact or by receiving contaminated blood products. He cited numerous incidents of discriminatory practices involving persons with AIDS, including the refusal of some physicians, hospital staff, and ambulance workers to treat individuals suspected of having the disease. Dr. Pinka further asserted that because AIDS was initially perceived as a gay health problem there were less aggressive research efforts by the appropriate health agencies.

Lillene Fifield of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center reported that substance abuse poses a very serious health problem in the gay and lesbian community. She referred to a 1975 study conducted by the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center which concluded that one third of the homosexual community in Los Angeles abused alcohol. According to the study, lesbians and gays averaged 19 bar nights a month and imbibed an average of six drinks a night. Ms. Fifield offered three principal reasons for this high incidence of alcoholism: the stress of living in a condemning world, the drinking attitudes of the society at large and the lack of safe alternative meeting places for gays and lesbians. According to Ms. Fifield, the

problem of alcoholism in the lesbian and gay community is exacerbated by treatment agencies ill-equipped to understand the special needs of homosexuals. Ms. Fifield indicated that this is the reason why gay and lesbian-run alcoholism programs have had a much higher success rate.

Health recommendations made by the presenters:

1. Provide equitable access for gays and lesbians to medical schools and other health care training facilities.
2. Include accurate information on gays and lesbians in medical school curricula and professional journals and textbooks.
3. Provide staff in County substance abuse programs with training on the special needs of gay and lesbian clients.

Youth

Geneva Fernandez of the Youth Department of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center testified that she counsels approximately 50 young people a month: 69 percent are homeless, 20 percent are Latino, and 18 percent are Black. Ms. Fernandez stated that many of her clients are "throwaways," having been abandoned by their families and friends. Since Los Angeles is a mecca for both youth and gay cultures, many young gays and lesbians are drawn to this area. Once here, they are often homeless, unemployed, and exploited, according to Ms. Fernandez. Many become involved in prostitution and substance abuse, and when they seek help find service providers who are insensitive or homophobic.

Dr. Albert Ogle, Director of Youth Services at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center and Associate of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Laguna Beach, also observed that the young people seen at the Center have been rejected by everyone they turned to for support. He observed that the institutions giving love, help, and guidance to youth simply do not function for young homosexuals. He noted that a recent training session for school counselors in the Los Angeles Unified School District originally included material on homosexuality, yet this information was eventually deleted. In addressing the work done for youth at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, Dr. Ogle testified that there is a continual need for more housing, emergency services, long term support, and recreational opportunities. According to Dr. Ogle, these are children like all others, yet society turns its back on them.

Youth recommendations made by the presenters:

1. Provide in-service training for counselors and teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District on the issue of homosexuality and its ramifications for young people.
2. Include information on gay and lesbian lifestyles in sex education courses.

3. Increase information about homosexuality and resources for dealing with the problems of gays and lesbians to educators and educational institutions.
4. Address the need for a "minority policy" for lesbian and gay youth in the new Children's Services Department, including protective services, foster placement, probation, and runaway shelters.

Violence and Law Enforcement

Many speakers registered concern over verbal or physical abuse or threat of it, saying that it diminishes the quality of life for all homosexuals. Attorney Thomas Coleman, a member of the Attorney General's Commission on Racial, Ethnic, Religious and Minority Violence, testified that attacks on homosexuals are on the increase. He cited a study by the National Gay Task Force that reported 1,682 acts of verbal harassment, physical assault, and homicide against homosexuals in 12 cities during the first eight months of 1983. In contrast, he said, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith reported 1,422 incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism and harassment nationwide for all of 1982. However, Mr. Coleman stated, no statistics exist for Los Angeles, although documentation of physical and verbal abuse is plentiful.

Captain James Cook, Commander of the West Hollywood Sheriff's Station, also indicated that statistics are not available on incidents of violence against homosexuals, and he explained that when answering a citizen's complaint, "We don't ask, Are you gay or are you straight?" Nonetheless, he emphasized that the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department has become increasingly sensitive to the needs of the gay community over the last two decades. He continued by saying that the West Hollywood Station's commitment to better community relations with gays and lesbians was genuine. He illustrated by describing both the cadet training program which brings in gay community members to inform and sensitize cadets, and the clergy volunteer program, which sets up crisis mediation between the Sheriff's Department and the gay community in the event of a dispute between the two.

Matt St. George, representing the Gay and Lesbian Police Advisory Task Force, stated that there is still much room for progress in gay-police relations. He reported incidents when police were slow in responding to calls for help from gay bars but quick and deliberate in answering complaints of "overcrowding" in these same bars. Mr. St. George blamed Chief Darryl Gates for inflaming anti-gay feelings of police officers by labeling homosexuals as "unnatural." Mr. St. George chronicled the "long and bitter" history between the Los Angeles Police Department and the gay community. He stated that before the Consenting Adults Bill was passed in California in 1976, making sex acts between consenting adults legal, arrest and harassment of anyone suspected of being a homosexual was commonplace. Before 1976 hundreds of otherwise law abiding gays and lesbians acquired a criminal record. As a result, he went on to say, fear of the police continues to make homosexuals reluctant to report crimes of assault.

Law enforcement recommendations made by presenters:

1. Increase the education of police recruits in the area of gay and lesbian lifestyles.
2. Recruit and hire openly homosexual police officers.
3. Begin to document carefully incidents of violence against gays and lesbians.

Employment

The need for the AB 1 type of legislation that would make employment discrimination illegal in California was mentioned repeatedly throughout the testimony. Attorney Lee Walker said that the defeat of this legislation last year in California, through a veto by the Governor, has brought the issue of discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation to the foreground of civil rights concerns for homosexuals.

Both Lee Walker and attorney Stephen Weltman testified that no strategy designed to improve the status of gays and lesbians can ignore the central position of the right to work. They stated that widespread employment discrimination against homosexuals creates a sense of helplessness and despair. Contributing to this is a lack of effective and unambiguous legal remedies, coupled with the hesitancy of victims to litigate because it requires publicly declaring their homosexuality. At work, self-censorship has always been integral to economic survival for gays and lesbians, according to Walker and Weltman. Gays and lesbians know that they must never disclose personal matters, discuss what they did on the weekend, or put a picture of a companion on their desks.

Stephen Weltman noted that another area of discrimination was in the disbursement of employee benefits. Life insurance, health and dental coverage, and retirement benefits are unavailable to the life-mates of lesbians and gays. According to Mr. Weltman, these individuals are deprived an opportunity to legally marry and then penalized for it.

Chris Uszler of the Alliance of Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry testified that the occurrence of discrimination against gays and lesbians in the industry varied from profession to profession. He said the worst discrimination was undoubtedly in the higher paying echelons and in the acting profession. Mr. Uszler noted that traditional stereotypes give rise to the notion that gays are unreliable and dispositionally inappropriate for advancement. He reported that verbal harassment and cruel jokes were rampant at all levels of the entertainment industry and often created an oppressive working environment.

Employment recommendations made by the presenters:

AB 1 type employment protection for gays and lesbians should be passed by Los Angeles County.

Other Issues

Several speakers addressed the special problems of minority gays and lesbians, including employment discrimination, where they often face double discrimination. Aisha Jones, a black lesbian, testified that she had been the victim of discrimination based on sex, race, and sexual orientation.

It was emphasized by several speakers that homosexuals who are not white and male may feel that both mainstream society and gay society discriminate against them. Society at large has difficulty in acknowledging their existence, while the gay community has historically deprived them of full acceptance, recognition, and positions of power.

Commission Findings and Recommendations

The Commission on Human Relations reflects a wide range of beliefs and attitudes regarding the issues raised at this hearing, as is true of the community at large: there is no doubt that homosexuality is still a controversial, emotional, and highly charged topic.

Yet not long ago this was the case with racial issues and questions related to racial segregation, discrimination, and equal opportunity. Although the achievement of a racially just society lies in the future, and both prejudice and discrimination persist, we have made substantial progress in recent years. Although we may disagree on methods and programs, public policy leaves no doubt about our common goals.

Similar progress in the area of sexual orientation is needed, and the intent of the Commission is to aid this endeavor. Despite individual differences of opinion on individual issues, the Commission unanimously believes that the unfair treatment of any person because of race, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, or disability must be reduced and eventually eliminated. In fact, our legal mandate requires us to promote this end.

The Commission, therefore, has unanimously found through this hearing that the following serious problems exist in our community and unanimously makes the following recommendations:

Commission Findings

1. It has been widely validated in scientific research that sexual orientation is established early in life.
2. Numerous studies have concluded that there is no significant difference in the incidence of anti-social behavior between homosexuals and heterosexuals.
3. Many religious and secular institutions have been reluctant to acknowledge the common humanity of gay and lesbian persons.
4. Anti-gay bigotry is often reinforced by insensitive and stereotypical depiction of gays in the media.

5. Living in a society prejudiced against them results in considerable stress for gay and lesbian people, which can contribute to physical and mental health problems. The availability of well-informed and sensitive health care professionals is extremely limited.
6. AIDS has often been publicly perceived as an exclusively gay problem, which has exacerbated anti-homosexual feelings already present in the community. Misinformation and fear about the disease have resulted in the denial of treatment and related services to some individuals with AIDS.
7. Employment discrimination based on a person's sexual orientation is perceived to be widespread, in both entry and advancement level jobs.
8. An historically tense relationship between the gay community and law enforcement in Los Angeles has contributed to the perception by gays that police discrimination and harassment of gays, though much reduced from the level in the past, continues to exist.
9. The gay and lesbian community in Los Angeles is alarmed by what it perceives as an increase in anti-homosexual harassment and violence.

Commission Recommendations

1. The Board of Supervisors should support the passage of AB 1 and urge the Governor to sign the bill into law.
2. Should AB 1 not become law during the current session of the Legislature, thus including gays and lesbians in the Statewide protection afforded other groups, the Board of Supervisors should direct the County Counsel to draft an ordinance prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation in Los Angeles County.
3. The County Department of Health Services and the Mental Health Department should utilize the available professional expertise in the gay and lesbian community for staff education about the needs of gays and lesbians.
4. Since all indications point to AIDS continuing to be a serious public health problem, the County Health Department should allocate more resources to educating the public about the disease.
5. The Children's Services Department and other County agencies that serve youth should establish a clear and consistent policy for dealing effectively with young homosexuals.
6. The television networks should each develop a firm and consistent policy to bring about a more balanced and realistic portrayal of gays and lesbians.

Appendix

Presenters for the Hearing

Prejudice and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation: Myth
and Reality about Gays and Lesbians in Los Angeles County

June 13, 1984

Plummer Park (Fiesta Hall)

1200 N. Vista

West Hollywood, California

Jane Patterson, M.D.

Southern California Physicians for Human Rights

Matt St. George, Attorney

Gay and Lesbian Police Advisory Task Force

Chris Uszler, Attorney

Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Artists in the Entertainment Industry

Lee Walker, Attorney

Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Artists in the Entertainment Industry

Thomas F. Coleman, Attorney

Attorney General's Commission on Racial, Ethnic, Religious and Minority
Violence

Aslan Heidorn, Managing Editor

Frontiers

Jeff Beane, Psychotherapist

National Organization for Changing Men

Lillene Fifield, Director/Education Component

The Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center

Martin Finn, M.D., Medical Director

Public Health Programs

Los Angeles County Health Services Department

Ivy Bottini

Founder and Member of the Gay and Lesbian Police Advisory Task Force

Stephen Weltman, Attorney

Chairperson, Coalition to Pass Assembly Bill I

Jim L. Kepner

National Gay Archives

Captain James Cook, Commander
West Hollywood Station
Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department

Reverend Fernando Martinez
Founder and Pastor of the Latin Church of Christian Fellowship

Reverend Peg Beissert
West Hollywood Presbyterian Church

Father Albert Ogle, Director/Youth Services
The Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center

Allan T. Pinka, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, Psychological Advisory Council
AIDS Project

Roy Kawasaki and Tak Yamamoto
Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays, Inc.

Alan K. Malyon, Ph.D., President
Los Angeles Society of Clinical Psychologists

Pam Parker
Municipal Elections Committee of Los Angeles (MECLA)

June Awano Lagmay, Council Aide
Peggy Stevenson, Councilwoman

Aeisha Jones
Lesbians of Color

Midge Costanza, Former Special Assistant to the
President of the United States (Jimmy Carter)

Charles Stewart
Black and White Men Together

Reverend Ernest Rudolph
United States Mission

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